WALT WHITMAN AND THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN AMERICAN POETRY

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Carlyle - Emerson Correspondence, Volume 11

WALT WHITMAN AND THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN

AMERICAN POETRY.

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicans to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater
than before known,
Arouse, for you must justify me.
I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the
darkness.
I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns
a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.

-Walt Whitman, "Poets to Come",

Inscriptions Leaves of Grass p.15.

WALT WHITMAN AND THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN

AMERICAN POETRY.

1.

The Motives That Prompted Whitman to Establish

A New Verse-form.

When it first become apparent that contemporary poetry in America was no longer following the conventional forms, one of the questions most recurrent was, "Is the new style a return to Whitman?" In these earlier days of the "modern movement" which can be

dated vaguely 1912, it was not clear whether Whitman's departure from traditional forms was directly antededent to the new style.[1]

It would have been easier for readers to understand vers libre (especially those who had failed to follow the trend of French versification) if the poets and critics had said definitely, "Whitman is responsible." That there was nothing definite at all about the movement did and still does confuse the most thoughtful readers; at the same time this propensity to shift and change explains why writers did not wish to bind (indeed, could not have bound) themselves by statement to any one influence -- the very impetus of their swift and rather breath-taking progress had been gained by wrenching away from all distinct confinements. They wanted a precise source for their inspiration no more than they wanted a fixed name or a binding meter. The unfortunate label, vers libre is at least consistent with the desires of those who write it.

Whether the "good gray poet" was disclaimed tacitly or actually, it seems certain that the sentiment prevailed that he did not write free verse. (The reading public had not yet learned to define vers libre as "Verse-form based upon cadence". Free verse, still meant a kind of prose chopped up into short lines, governed neither by rhyms nor reason, but the writer's caprice.) His length of line was no doubt confused with rhythm length, critics judging

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1. "Some puzzled readers need a work which gives more illumination and less heated rhapsody than the essays on Walt Whitman which we have become accustomed to ...Since the first appearance of Leaves of Grass we have of course learned more thoroughly that Rhythm is the more important and even that great poetry can be written without meter". --Louis Bredvold, Review of Walt Whitman: A Critical Study By Basil de Selincourt, Dial 57:17-8 July 1, 1914.

that a differentiation must be made on that basis. The psychological effect of his long lines as they appear on the printed page has impressed not only the layman but the technician, and just how much of this feeling that Whitman "did not write free verse" is well-founded is only to be ascertained by careful analysis.

As interest in poetry has developed steadily during those years from 1912 to the present date,[1] and more definite theories have developed in connection with versification (especially those of that mysterious borderland of rhythmic prose), literary commentators are admitting Whitman as indirectly responsible for not only the new form, but the new spirit.

"Strangely enough," writes Harriet Monroe, "Whitman's influence was felt first in France. It reached England and finally America, indirectly from Paris, where the poets, stimulated by translations of the great American, especially Bajazette's and by the ever-adventurous quality of French scholarship, have been experimenting with free verse ever since Mallarmé."[2]

Pierre Lanux, writing from the point-of-view of the Frenchman, says, "French literature of to-day shows marks of one American influence which may well be called decisive. Walt Whitman's blood runs in the veins of the young writers of France... But his influence on a few poets is little compared with his influence on the mentality of the young in general. It is more vital than the discovery of a new resource in rhythm or in melody. It is a matter of

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1. "America is yielding herself in unsuspected ways to the vision and imagination of her poets. The variety of the year's volumes can not help but convince the observer that American Poetry is marching steadily forward". --William Stanley Braithewaite. "The Past Year's Poetry" Literary Digest 51:12: 84-5 Dec. 4,'15
2. Introduction to The New Poetry edited by Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson. p.X.

immensely renewed inspiration that is one of the treasures of our times."[1]

The time did not seem ripe, after Whitman's death in 1891 for the appearance of a group of followers. Of the immediate successors of Whitman, Moody and Hovey are two of the most important and poets. The former confined himself almost entirely to the European conception of verse. Hovey is cited as a disciple of Whitman's in spirit if not always in letter. Mr. Braithwaite speaks of Hovey as "The first link in the chain of continuity which America was creating in the art of poetry".[2]

So far as the free forms were concerned, the chain failed to be continuous in America. Hovey's influence was not pronounced. Although the French school applauded Whitman as its master, American poets seemed unresponsive to his

"Arouse! For you must justify me!"

This gap in the series of links (to pursue Mr. Braithwaite's metaphor) is a further reason for the hesitancy critics have shown in connecting the new movement with Whitman.

Verse-forms reappear in one of two ways: (by "reappear" I mean assume powerful control of contemporary literature)--either a genius from individual motives makes the form prevalent by his mastery of it or a group of writers, simultaneously or causally with each other, employ it. In the latter case the group is often termed a "school". The influence of such schools usually altern-

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1. New Poets of France. The Dial, September 1917.

2. Introduction to "Anthology of Magazine Verse" - 1916,- William Stanley Braithwaite.

ates with the influence of great poets, as Herrick, Carew, Suckling, and Lovelace after Shakespeare; Young, Gay, Blair, Dyer, and Shenstone after Milton; and in the richness of the nineteenth century, numerous masters followed by numerous schools, -Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats, like great ships silhouetted unforgettably against the horizon while wave after wave followed,--the nineteenth century lyrists, group upon group: Landor, Leigh Hunt, Praed, Locker-Lampson, Coventry Patmore.

The school may not echo the genius -- often it exhibits a reaction to his style; it is rather the voiceless, who keep alive his spirit, the men and women who do not sing, or cry their thoughts and emotions aloud, but who are affected deeply by his message. And the moment the prevailing verse-form fails to express their lives, it becomes ineffectual, sounds its own knell and out of the past a different verse-form appears. What is the decisive factor which determines what that form shall be? Social life; life as it is lived by common people, that great "everybody" which is composed of nobodies.

Preceding Whitman and contemporary with him, there was a school interested in the artificial forms -- the rondeau, the triolet, the ballade, and chant royal. Edmund Gosse in his "Plea For Certain Exotic Forms of Verse" voiced the convictions of Banville and Daudet, French lyrists, Austin Dobson and Swinburne in England, and Bunner in America. Since human nature is not exotic, exotic verse can never express life. The artificial forms were doomed almost before they commenced to live- much as orchids would be doomed if planted in anordinary Illinois garden. The thought of the common people had kept alive a more plastic medium ever since

the Hebraic chant was uttered:

"The grass withereth
The flower fadeth
But the word of the Lord abideth forever".

Down through the centuries, men had thought, sung and sometimes spoken in free rhythms. The form was to reappear as new in 1855 when Leaves of Grass by a practically unknown writer, Walt Whitman, was published. The individual needs of a great master had coincided with the need of his age.

A brief glance at the life of Whitman shows to some extent how he recognized and responded to this urge toward an unbroken trail in versification, why he could not adapt himself to the traditional type of literature, and how he struggled to do so, in vain.

His ancestry, of the same stock as Oliver Wendell Holmes, combined Connecticut and Dutch parentage. Whitmans lived in Suffolk County, Long Island until the middle of the seventeenth century. Walt Whitman was born there in 1819, in the hamlet of West Hills, and spent his early years on a farm in the vicinity.

It is said that the poet was first born in him when he heard the mocking-bird sing. He was to harbor his vivid child-impressions until his maturity could give vent to them in a burst of pure lyric beauty.

"The rest might not, but I have treasured every note,
For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding,
Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows,
Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds, and sights after their sorts,
The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,

I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,
Listen'd long and long.
Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,
Following you my brother".[1]

Otherwise than this remarkable capacity for retaining sense-impressions, he seems to have been a normal boy, described as having no leanings toward the spiritual, temperate, "unmoved by either aggrandizement or self-sacrifice." His family having moved to Brooklyn, the city gave him various opportunities for following his bent toward journalism and he was in turn a compositor, miscellaneous writer, reporter and editorial writer. At this time he was considered something of an idler by his friends; in reality he was spending most of his time reading the things he had missed and needed for development -- The Iliad of Homer, Eschuylus, Sophocles, (translations and prose versions) "the old German Nibelungen, the ancient Hindoo poems, and one or two other masterpieces, Dante's among them", and the Old and New Testaments.

He had also developed a passion for people. He liked the Broadway drivers and their yarns: "They had immense qualities, largely animal, eating, drinking, women -- great personal pride in their way--perhaps a few slouches here and there, but I should have trusted the general run of them, in their simple good-will and honor under all circumstances." In New York he was hearing great orators and singers. Later he turned to oratory as a possible means of expression, writing, as his brother George said, "barrels of speeches" none of which he seemed to have regarded as successful.

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1. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", Sea-Drift, Leaves of Grass p. 8

Nor was he successful in his prose. His short stories approached tracts -- he was thought somewhat radical, having a number of didactic reforms which he tried to set forth in a swarm of melodramatic tales. He realized later how these efforts failed. He knew they were formalistic and restrained and he chafed at the conventions which kept them so. His poems were of the same unhappy style.[1] As Mr. Carpenter writes, "His powers of expression ... lagged far behind his keenness of sensation and perception."

Now he began to evince a peculiar unrest. The germ of social responsibility was creeping into his nature -- he cared little for set political parties, he felt law to be inefficiemt, he sympathized with humanity

Here is common ground between Whitman and the number of writers of modern school. He, as many of them are, was sensitive to social ills, eager to understand each stratum of society; and it is out of just such a response to social demands that most of our modern verse is growing. A certain class of our youth of to-day is stirred by discontent with life as it is lived, impatient with convention and restraint, living life for experience, knowing others by sharing their reactions. All periods are of course periods of growth, but there are historic eras when a nation or an individual is seen to advance so much more rapidly that it resembles a plant in springtime or the young, greening grass. Later, growth glides into culmination and the fruit is more comparable to the works of writers whose essential characteristic is maturity: Ruskin, Lowell, Robert Bridges. They have a high dignity and a

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1. George R. Carpenter, Walt Whitman, p. 26

sureness of vision which bespeaks the true fruition of ideas. The work of Whitman cannot be thought of as a static result. It is growth itself -- it is a function.

Carpenter writes: "If such a mind[1] and body were to be vitalized by some unknown, some tremendously dynamic force, he would at least be unique. It was not along conventional lines that such a spirit could be developed." It seems obvious that the motive which prompted Whitman to a new verse form was as much of the individual as of the age. Other poets of America at the same era were well satisfied with old vehicles of expression. Contrast Bryant--an active worker in the Republican party,[2] his range in poetry narrow, his artistic needs satisfied with the scope of blank verse. Whittier had not the original, unbounded spirit of Whitman. Holmes seldom sounded "the deeper notes". Lowell, (whose death was in the year 1891 just before Whitman's death) was typically the poet -- a man of culture. It has been said to annoy the literati of this country that Europe has thought Whitman more representative of our art than Lowell. Many Americans are more flattered to think the latter more typically American. On the other hand it is actually a better tribute from our critics that they credit us with a love for the new rather than the old, with sponsoring an unusual verse-form rather than the traditional type of thing which Lowell did.

A lamentable gap in Whitman's biography prevents us from knowing just <u>how</u> he attained to the unusual. The theory that it arose from his natural inclination and the spoken word is plausible.[3]

See Page 10 for foot-notes.

1.

"Whitman is the poet of the principle of life, of the pilgrimage and progress of the soul, of perpetual growth and amelioration, of the joy of spiritual growth," --Basil de Selincourt, Walt Whitman : A Critical Study.

2.

"Examine the most famous of them (American poets). Not one of its exponent burned with a keen and racy originality, the quality which, of all American writers, none but Walt Whitman possessed .. Van Wyck Brooks writes (America's Coming of Age, B.W. Huebsch) 'Our poets were commonly six in number, kindly, gray-bearded, or otherwise grizzled old men.' Lowell almost achieved greatness--more than the others he felt the dignity of native character; but when he disclosed it, he revealed only the part that was most obvious and 'comic' through a dialect that is theatrical and often misrepresentative. Emerson, the most original of them, was less of a poet than a theologian and metaphysician...Bryant was a chilly and water-color Wordsworth. Whittier was by turns a mild minister and a milder methodist". --Louis Untermeyer, The New Era in American Poetry .

3.

"It has been commonly said that Whitman was the father of modern free verse and that his first published free verse poem was Blood-money, his second being Wounded in the House of Friends.

"Blood-money was originally published in the supplement to the daily edition of Horace Greeley's New York Tribune, March 22, 1850. Wounded in the House of Friends, signed Walter Whitman, first appeared in the Tribune of June 14, 1850. The original version contains two passages which the author saw fit to omit in the collect reprint. One of these excised passages I quote:

" 'Vaunters of the Free,
Why do you strain your lungs off southward?
Why be going to Alabama?
Sweep first before your own door;
Stop this squalling and this scorn
Over the mote there in the distance;"--Emory Holloway, Adelphi College, Brooklyn, in a letter to The Nation, Dec. 27, 1917.

Mr. Carpenter is one of those who believes that "Whitman's verse-method grew out of his own impassioned speech... It was only when he began to conceive himself as speaking that he found himself following uncertainly a faint, new and inner rhythm as it were that of his own pulses."[1.]

Whitman himself felt his verse-form to be the "legitimate result and evolutionary outcome of the past...The New World needs the poems of realities and science and of the democratic average."[2] In explaining this medium, he reverts inevitably to the description of his historic background: "I know very well that my Leaves could not possibly have emerged ....from any other era than that of the nineteenth century, nor any other land than democratic America, and from absolute triumph of the national union arms... Has not the time arrived when (if it must be said for democratic America's sake, if for no other) there must imperatively come a readjustment of the whole theory and nature of Poetry?.....Of the great poems received from abroad and from the ages, and to-day enveloping and penetrating America, is there one that is consistent with the United States, or essentially applicable to them as they are and are to be?"[3]

This conviction that he must be consistent with democracy was no doubt a second great factor in determining his verse-form -- it moulded all his thoughts, and we have seen how magically his rhythm obeyed his emotion. Generosity toward all men rather than the few marks the poet of democracy. He did not believe himself set apart from ordinary mankind.

1.--Carpenter--Walt Whitman p.42

2. Whitman --"A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads", Leaves of Grass p. 54.

3. Whitman --"A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads", Leaves of Grass p. 49.

"One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
.....
Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing."[1]

Contemporary poets have taken up the same urge to express the modern man, deriving it from the age, from that unrest which is the essence of revolution. Revolution of spirit means corresponding revolution in technique. They have, like Whitman a tremendous longing to express everything, a desire to compass all emotions - to leave out nothing- no one. Often they approach the mystic in this seizing of the universal. Their insistence on reality, however, causes them to include details, minute, homely, sometimes crude but always sincere. Insincerity is the only fault which bars a writer from the school. Critics wish, and often rightly, that faulty technique constituted agreater crime to these head-long modern poets. Whitman's critics have wished the same of him. (They have said he locked the "dove-tailed accuracy of more intellectual poets") This exaggerated sense of the importance of democracy in all things caused Whitman to abhor neglecting even one phase of nature or humanity. He, the great master, the leader, tried to include every aspect of life in his poetry. They, the followers, (often unconscious disciples) are working out this principle by including every type of sincere poet in their "school". They, no more than Whitman feel a desire for self-aggrandizement or self-sacrifice. They wish to live to the full, to express, to

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1. "One's-self I sing," Inscription, Leaves of Grass, p.1

create; the social sense causes them to refuse to ignore the need of the weaker to express and to create. And so the school is vast-- including everybody. Sincerity sifts the true from the false and separates affectation from art.[1]

These two great factors, then, one of the technique and one of spirit -- the inclination to the poetry of speech, and the inclination to the poetry of inclusion --wove themselves together, and to understand them is to take one step further in untwining the motives which prompted Whitman to his great experiment. His unconventional education had left his mind umhampered by set ideas of art, and when the urge to write became strong enough these factors were allowed full mastery of his pen. He writes: "Let me not dare attempt the definition of poetry nor answer the question what it is. Like Religion, Love, Nature... no definition that has ever been made sufficiently encloses the name Poetry; nor can any rule or convention so absolutely obtain but some great exception may arise and disregard and overturn it".[2]

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1. It is, perhaps, dangerous to generalize as to the characteristics of the modern school. It must be remembered that all of the contemporary poets are not moved by the ills of social life. The Imagists, I believe, are inclined to shut out the "reform" type of poetry, and to deprecate the attention paid by such poets as Untermeyer, Oppenheim and Masters to social evils. In her "Tendencies in Modern American Poetry,"Miss Lowell calls Masters a "revolutionary poet. He has been caught in the sociological wave which has been sweeping the world of late years". She names Sandburg as belonging to the "multi-racial America" and points out the fact that he seeks beauty in slaughter-housesanddstrikes! She remarks laconically that "Propaganda is the pit-fall of poets". This is quite contrary to Untermeyer who writes ("Challenge").

"But never let me dare forget
The bitter ballads of the slums".

2. "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", Leaves of Grass. p. 47

We see him groping for the right foem, failing again and and again, and finally giving his Leaves of Grass to the world with the naive hope of the propagandist that his theory would prevail at once. He wanted an "athletic and defiant" native literature. He desired freedom from convention for "poets and orators to come" as well as for himself and his own generation.

Those who read the book were amazed and startled by its unusual qualities. Emerson, writing of it to Carlyle said "It has terrible eyes, and buffalo strength and is indisputably American"[1]. In another comment he says, "I find in it courage of treatment which so delights us and which larger perception only can inspire"[2]. Prof. F.N. Scott, a student of Whitman's rhythm, has described the poem as evincing a delicate susceptibility to certain modes of motion and sequence of sound, particularly the free swaying, urging motions of the ferry-boat , the railroad train, the flight of the birds and among sounds, those of the wind, the locusts, in the tree-tops and the sea.

Whitman considered Leaves of Grass experimental much as the American republic is with its theory. "I found myself remaining possessed, at the age of thirty-one to thirty-three with a special desire and conviction...This was to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic-form and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying the momentous spirit and facts of immediate days, and of current America.....Plenty of songs have been sung-- beautiful, matchless songs -- adjusted to other lands than these--

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1. Carlyle -Emerson Correspondence, Volume 11 page 283.

2. Emerson to Whitman.

another spirit and stage of evolution; but I would sing, and leave out or put in quite solely with reference to America and to-day. Modern science and democracy seem'd to be throwing out their challenge to poetry myths of the past".[1]

Again he speaks of it as his carte de visite to the coming generations of the new world.

He wished to avoid all "poetic" similes -- to be faithful to the perfect likelihoods of nature "healthy, exact, simple, disdaining ornament". He had sought to leave out myth, legend, and ancient heroes. These tendencies have been followed by the Imagists of the present age. In brief, the new ideals of writing which he insisted upon were:

I. Omission of stock ornamentation and hackneyed devices.

II. The exaltation of the modern rather than the ancient.

III. The omission of plots, legends and literary allusions.

IV. A new attitude toward the universe.

To quote his retrospective comment on the book, once more:

"It is certainly time for America above all, to begin this readjustment in the scope and basic point of view of verses; for everything else has changed. As I write (about 1888) I see in an article on Wordsworth, in one of the current English magazines the lines: (A few weeks ago an eminent French critic said that, owing to the tendency to science..... poetry would cease to be read in fifty years".[2] Whitman continues that he anticipates the contrary and his prophecy seems true. Are there any who doubt that in America our love of poetry is increasing? If poetry had refused to

1. "A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads," Leaves of Grass. p.44
2. "A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads," Leaves of Grass. p.46

change with life the prediction of the French critic might have been fulfilled. Whitman's service to poetry was that of swerving it into a new channel so that it could hurry on with the swift current rather than remain stranded in some stagnant pool of tradition and convention. He believes the final contribution of poetry to life to be the "ultimate vivification of facts ...Without that vivification --which the poet or other artist alone can give - reality would seem incomplete, and science, democracy, and life, itself, finally, in vain".[1]

With all these demands placed by his own subtle insight upon his medium, poetry, what wonder that Whitman felt his thoughts "scarcely to be packed within a narrow act"-- that he refused to confine them within the old limits? A new thing to say meant to him a new vehicle for expression --"incomparable things said incomparably well", as Emerson wrote. Unusually sensitive to the world in which he lived, Whitman felt that "for all these new and evolutionary facts, meanings, purposes -- new poetic messages, new forms, and expressions are inevitable."

Of his age he says: "The nineteenth century now well toward its close --the uprisings of national masses and shiftings of boundary lines -- the war of attempted secessions -- the stormy rush and haste of nebulous forces --never can ~~in~~ future years witness more excitement and din of action, never completer change of army front along the whole line, the whole civilized world." The world of 1919 has been repeating the same prophetic cry --"Never can future years" -- as is the habit of each day and age, as will

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1. "A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads," Leaves of Grass. p.46

be the habit as long as life shall last. It is no strange coincident that the world of 1919 can echo Whitman's words written in 1888; that we could describe our age in the phraseology of his time save that degree has changed and that the revolution we are witnessing is vaster and more potential. That this recurrence has come about is but a fact of life itself, and has continued so since the first evolution of order from chaos. To each such decisive upheaval literature must gage itself. It is indeed significant that a single individual recognized this need in the period Whitman represents, while in our period a whole group of writers has faced the demand and sought to compass it.

He was the revolutionist of the past. We are listening to the songs of revolutionists in the present. A glance at his aims and motives shows them to be linked indisputably with the modern. Whether his verse-form has as much relation to free verse is less easily ascertained.

II
THE RELATION OF WHITMAN'S VERSE*FORM TO FREE VERSE.

The realm of poetry was vastly broadened when irregular lines with varied rhythms came to be regarded as other than prose. The question of what constitutes prose and what constitutes verse is one which perhaps will never be settled satisfactorily, at least to those who do not insist on verse adhering to an exact pattern.

What is meant by pattern? That which verse follows when its time-units are easily noticed by the ear to be equal. The beats follow in regular succession, satisfying the expectation of the listener much as a clock or metronome satisfies it. The

The sense of pattern remains:

```
--!---!-
-!--!-
--!---!
-!-!-!
--!---!-
-!-!-!-!
--!---!
-!-!-!
```

(My interpretation of the pattern is intended to be merely an interpretation. The system I have used (-!) is meant to be indefinite so that the dash can signify either a short beat, a secondary accent or a light stress according to the various pronunciations. The intention was chiefly to emphasize stresses.)

If da is substituted for a short and doo for a long (da-) (doo!) the passage reads:

```
da da doo da da doo da          1
da doo da da doo da             2
da da doo da da da doo          3
da doo da doo da doo            4
da da doo da da da doo da       5
da doo da doo da doo da doo     6
da da doo da da da doo          7
da doo da doo da doo            8
```

The effect of the lines read successively as 1,2,3,4,5,6, 7,8, is more complicared than if it is read 1,3,5,7, or 2,4,6,8. The ear expects: a doo at the end of line 2 instead of a da; an added da in line 3; the ommission of da doo in line 6; and an added da in line 7. With these changes the pattern would be regular:

```
da da doo da doo da doo da
da doo da da doo da (doo)
da da doo da doo da doo (da)
da doo da doo da doo
da da doo da doo da doo da
da doo da doo da doo
da da doo da doo da doo (da)
da doo da doo da doo.
```

The remembrance of the pattern in 1 is easily carried over to 3, 2 to 4, 3 to 5, 4 to 6, and so on. It is seen how the time units

da da doo vary with da doo, and how this variation forms the pattern. The ear and the eye both expect such a recurrence and variation.

Now alternate with the first regular stanza four lines which are without pattern: (substituting Madrid for Cathay in order to do away with the expectancy of rime.)

> I am fevered with the sunset,
> O, secret of the earth and sky!
> I am fretful with the bay,
> Of you O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!
> For the wander-thirst is on me
> Of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of my land!
> And my soul is in Madrid,
> Of you O prairies! of you gray rocks! (1)

Because "Osecret of the earth and sky" follows "Iam fevered with the sunset", the former line is read da doo da doo da doo da doo arbitrarily rather than as it might be read at first glance da doo da da da doo da doo, that is, before it had been heard in such a sequence. And the long line--"Of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of my land" is changed in various syllables to make it seem regular after "For the wander-thirst is on me" which has a strong enough rhythm to dictate it to the successive line.

> "And my soul is in Madrid,
> Of you o prairies! of you gray rocks!"

Here is the unexpected. The ear is puzzled and even the regularity of the lines 1, 3, 5 and 7 is lost, although their pattern remains the same. Whether or not there is a pattern can be seen by substituting da doo:

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1. Walt Whitman,- "Passage to India" Leaves of Grass .

rhythm is consequently pronounced and unmistakable:[1]

I am fèvered with the sùnset,
I am frètful with the bày,
For the wànder-thirst is òn me
And my sòul is in Cathày.

The scanning of such a passage can be interpreted in more than one way but if ten different people read it they would at least stress the syllables: fev'ered, sun(set), fret(ful), bay, wan(der), on, soul, Ca(thay)'. There would be doubt about the syllables which are pronounced more lightly and little agreement as to secondary accents, nevertheless the succession of longs and shorts makes up a unit which is repeated with a few variations in the four lines. The rime in lines two and four accentuates the rhythm. If the verses were altered:

I am fevered with the sunset,
I am fretful with the bay,
For the wander-thirst is on me
And my soul is in Madrid,

the pattern would not, of course, be altered but the psychological expectation of rime would not be present during the reading of the succeeding lines. The passage would then be a kind of blank verse.

Now suppose the lines, regular in their arrangement, were alternated with four lines from "Spanish Johnny" (1)

I am fevered with the sunset,
(The Old West, the old time,)
I am fretful with the bay,
(The old wind singing through)
For the wander-thirst in on me
(The red, red grass a thousand miles)
And my soul is in Cathay.
And, Spanish Johnny, you!

---

1. Richard Hovey, "The Sea Gypsy" , "The Little Book of Modern verse , p. 11
2. Willa Sibert Cather--"Spanish Johnny", The New Poetry, An Anthology p. 44.

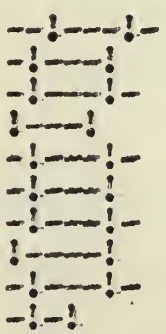
da da doo da doo da doo da
da doo da doo da doo da doo
da da doo da doo da doo
da doo da doo da doo da doo da doo da doo da doo da
da da doo da doo da doo da
da doo da dooda doo da doo da doo da doo da doo
da da doo da doo da doo
da doo da doo da da doo da doo.

The general effect is of iambics, but the line-lengths are not consistent with those set by the opening line.

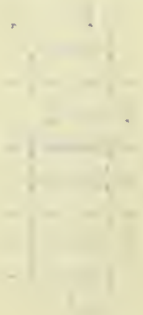
If the whole passage is fitted into a definite pattern irrespective of punctuation, and the ends of lines placed where the ear prompts, when the words are substituted, our passage reads (overlooking the nonsensical content):

I am fevered with the sunset,
O secret of the earth,
And sky
I am fretful with the
Bay of you oh wa
Ters of the sea, O winding
Creeks and rivers for
The wander thirst is on me
Of you, O woods and fields,
Of you stray mountains of my
Land and my soul is in
Madrid, of you, O prairies,
Of you, gray rocks!

This has the regular pattern:



The ear is satisfied with the sequence of doo das and da da doos, for each line contains three time units varied only by occasional feminine endings (caused by an extra da) and by the last line in which two rests occur, but which the ear imagines to be a short



and long, because the first and last units are each composed of da doo .

(-!)
-!(xx)-!

What do these seemingly irrational experiments show?

1. That rhythm is based on psychological expectancy.

2. That a pattern may be retained past its omission for one or two lines but that the ear is not capable of retaining it past many rhythmic disappointments.

3. That length of line determines expectancy.

4. That free verse differs from regular verse in not having a set pattern for equal time units. By a time unit I mean a group of syllables some of which are long, some of which are short but which together require time to pronounce which is equal with the succeeding time units. This is the meaning which I believe Miss Amy Lowell gives to it. "The syllables", she writes, "are unimportant in the sense that there might be many or few of the time intervals."[1]

I am using the term "psychological unit" to mean a longer collection of these time units grouped in a line. In regular verse the latter occurs in even numbers so that the psychological units are the same.

"The wander-thirst is on me and my soul is in Cathay". This line constitutes a psychological unit which is composed of equal time units, while corresponding to the preceding psychological unit,

"I am fevered with the sunset".

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1. Amy Lowell, "The Rhythm of Free Verse"--The Dial 54:758, January 17, 1918.

In free verse the time-units do not occur in any set number in each psychological unit; the psychological unit may or may not recur, but in case it does, the recurrence is not regular. Read again the lines:

Passage to more than India!
O secret of the earth and sky!
Of you, waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!
Of you O woods and fields! of you strong mountains of my (land!
Of you O prairies! of you gray rocks!
O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snow!
O day and night, passage to you!

It is plain then that time-units are not arranged in set numbers but there is a reiteration of the psychological units, although their recurrence is not based upon a pattern.

Prose, as opposed to free verse, conforms to no unit.

The difference between free verse and prose, it must be remembered holds only in some cases, since not always do we find the psychological unit recurring. Mr. William M. Patterson who has made a series of experiments in this field, writes,

"Is there no difference between such unrhymed cadence as you (Amy Lowell) have written and good prose?...There is at times not always, a difference; but it is a difference not of kind but of degree. The separate spacing of the phrases, whether printed or orally delivered, puts emphasis upon the rhythmic balancing <u>as such</u>. It keeps us from forgetting it when we see the phrases, first of all... On the other hand, when we hear them spoken by another we detect this suggested emphasis on the speaker's part upon a sequence of balances which might readily be blurred ... were the text from which he reads, printed in the solid block of

---

1. W. M. Patterson , Preface to <u>Rhythm of Prose</u>

ordinary prose."

Mr. Patterson continues (1) to classify the various kinds of verse and prose. There are seven types, he believes, three of which come under the category of vers libre: unitary verse (2) having equal time intervals (marked by chief accents and filled in with a quite variable number of less accented syllables); spaced prose (3) the balancing of broader groups in prose rhythms is accentuated by printing the phases on separate lines; mosaics (4) verse and prose alternate successively. The others are: metrical verse in which the effect of a repeated stress pattern is evident; polyphonic prose, in which tone-color patterns are more than in evidence than in ordinary prose; fluid prose--rhythm as rhythm is less obvious than in spaced prose; blends, in which effects not commonly found together are superimposed. (5) "Quite different are the Mosaics in the verse life of Edgar Lee Masters, where bit of unitary verse, metrical verse, spaced prose and normal prose joggle up against each other constantly. Walt Whitman, the most vigorous American poet expresses himself at times with the same uncertainity of genre. Long stretches of Whitman are quite tamely metrical - other stretches have a splendid free swing with sudden drops into rather futile regularity. It is only natural that we should resent in so big a personality both his plodding and his spluttering moments. We expect of him the swimming of a strong man."

(1) "New Verse and Old Verse" North Am. Review, Vol. 207 Feb. 1918.
(2) Illustrated by H.D.'s "Oread"--The New Poetry, An Anthology p.66
(3) Amy Lowell "Reaping", Men, Women and Ghosts .
(4) Edgar Lee Masters "Father Malley" Spoon River Anthology
(5) "New Verse and Old Prose" North Amer. Review, Vol. 207 Feb. '18.

The feeling that he is reading verse impels the reader to give more attention to rhythm than he does in reading prose."

Taking passages of Whitman's poetry, it can be seen whether or not the psychological units recur with enough consistency to be distinguished from prose:

(1) As I pondered in silence, returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long, a Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect, terrible in beauty, age and power, the genius of poets of old lands, as to me directing like flame its eyes, with finger pointing to many immortal songs, and menacing voice, 'What singest thou?' it said."

Compare this passage with one of Pater's: 2

"As with Dante, to the glory of God, it will be also great art; if over and above these qualities I summed up as mind and soul --that color and mystic perfume, and that reasonable structure , it has something of the soul of humanity in it, and finds its logical, its architectural place, in the great structure of human life."

Surely both passages are rhythmic -- the ear finds both balanced and smooth. The second has more words of unpoetical connotation, no inversions, and is more the phraseology of prose. Whether or not its rhythms are less obvious can be seen more easily by spacing both passages:

"As I pondered in silence,
Returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long,
A Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,
Terrible in beauty, age and power,
The genius of poets of old lands,
As to me, directing like flame its eyes,
With finger pointing to many immortal songs,
And menacing voice, 'What singest thou?' it said."

(1) Walt Whitman, "As I pondered in Silence"Leaves of Grass
(2) Walter Pater "Essay on Style" --Appreciation with an Essay on Style.

"As with Dante,
To the glory of God,
It will be also great art,
If over and above these qualities I sumed up as mind and
That color and mystic perfume, (soul--
And that reasonable structure,
It has something of the soul of humanity in it,
And finds its logical, its architectural place,
In the great structure of human life."

I believe Mr. Patterson would classify the second as fluid prose and the first as spaced prose; written as verse the passage from Pater seems not to have as obvious rhythms as the first, which may be designated as spaced or rhythmic prose.

An ordinary prose passage, chosen at random from Arnold Bennett's Old Wives Tales (1) illustrates an additional difference bewteen prose rhythmic prose.

"She lived under the eyes of her pupils.
Her life was one ceaseless effort
To avoid doing anything which might influence her charges for evil
Or shock the natural sensitiveness of their parents.
She had to wind her earthy way
Through a forest of the most delicate susceptibilities,
Fern-fronds that stretched across the path,
And that she must not even accidently disturb
With her skirt as she passed."

Prose has a greater abundance of two longs coming together; the prose writer especially allows this where there is no common or natural caesural pause.

\- ! ! - - ! - - ! -
She lived under the eyes of her pupils

and

\- - ! ! - ! - -
To avoid doing anything

These lines could not possibly be scanned

She lived un-der

---

1. Old Wives Tales p. 63

or

To a-void do-ing

without arbitrarily changing the natural accent. In poetry such an occurrence of two longs is usually accomplished by the comma; it cannot afford to appear often where there is no natural caesural pause, since a prosy sound results. The ear expects a short to follow a long, and if a pause is present instead of the short, the short beat is inserted imaginarily by the ear.

Another line of prose shows the effect:

(1) She had never been made much of

while a line from Whitman illustrates how unfortunate such an occurrence is in poetry:

\- ! - - ! - ! ! - !

I know they are very well where they are

At his worst, Whitman indulges in numerous lines which are not rhythmic:

"The President is there in the White House for you, it is not you who are here for him." 2

Such a line contains so few accents that two people would seldom chance to read it alike.

"Factories, mercantile life, labor-saving machinery, the Northeast, Northwest, Southwest." 3

lacks the tone-color and abundance of images of which Mr. Patterson speaks. Certainly this is a prose without rhythm:

"Why what have you thought of yourself?"

It is merely spaced with no claims to the title of poetry. It is noticeable that long beats occur together in these examples, where

1. "Un Vie" -DeMaupassant (English Translation)
2. & 3 "A Song for Occupations", Calamus, Leaves of Grass p.257

caesural pauses are not present.

Whitman's lines are not unpoetical in proportion to their great number. He has the trick of inserting a monosyllable here, a feminine ending or a gorgeous word there, so that the sense of monotony is not felt. Often his verse is purely metrical: 1

"When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the (night
I mourned and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love."

Besides the abundance of images and suggestive phrases, this passage is almost entirely composed of iambics; besides having equal time-units, it has recurring psychological units.

A certain regularity can also be observed in these lines from the same poem:

"In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.
Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life,(for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou wouldst surely die".)

Might this not be termed unitary verse? That is, "marked by the chief accents and filled in with a quite variable number of less accented syllables." Compare with it H.D.'s Oread: 2

"Whirl up, sea--
Whirl your pointed pines.
Splash your great pines
On our rocks.
Hurl your green over us--
Cover us with your pools of fir."

1. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" Memories of President Lincoln, Leaves of Grass p. 94.

2. --H.D. The New Poetry p.66

Here, I believe, the reader feels there are present two rhythm lengths, one represented by"Whirl up, sea", the other by "Whirl your pointed pines". The first is repeated but once, the second recurs two more times. In the passage from Whitman, there are also two rhythm lengths (or psychological units) the first type , represented by "In the swamp in secluded recesses" occurring in every line except the second and last which are representative of a second longer type, containing five time units each:

"A shy and hidden word is warbling a song."

If H.D. had been writing this passage she would doubtless have spaced the fourth and seventh lines:

"The hermit withdrawn to himself,
Avoiding the settlements"

and

"Death's outlet song of life,
(For well dear brother I know-- "

A question may arise as to whether or not "Avoiding the settlements" does not constitute a new psychological unit containing but two time-units and not recurrent, but it may, I think, be read so as to correspond to the psychological unit containing three.

Now read the two pairs of types placed so as to correspond:

In the swamp in secluded recesses	Whirl up, sea--	3---2
A shy and solitary bird is warbling a song	Whirl your pointed pines.	5----3

Do they not give the sense of the same synocpated rhythm? Is it not clear that when Whitman, like the writers of unitary verse produces this sort of poetry, it must be read in accordance with the natural accents, with the less stressed syllables brought

into subordination so that the item units rather than syllable units measure the lines?

Whitman uses lines so much longer than those generally employed by the modern unitary poets that readers often fail to connect his free verse with that written by such writers as Flecher and H.D. Very often it can be spaced in shorter units. He is fond of a pair of long lines recurring in immediate sequence between two shorter units:

> "Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
> Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields
> and the prairie wide,
> Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves
> and waves,
> I float the Carol with joy, with joy to thee O Death."(1)

Here a different spacing would interfere with the effect, which seems to be one for which Whitman consciously strove another example,from "There Was A Child Went Forth":

> "There was a child went forth every day,
> And the first object he look'd upon that object he became,
> And that object became part of him for the day or a certain
> part of the day,
> Or for many years or stretching cycles of years."(2)

Whitman's poetry cannot be classified in general, but on the whole it comes within the groups designated by Miss Lowell and Dr. Patterson as free verse: rhythmic or spaced prose, unitary verse, and mosaics. Sometimes it is fluid prose, some of it is rhythmical, some of it rhymed. Too often it is made up of portions that are mere prose with no poetical qualities. It is always various, vast and detailed. Sometimes its psychological units conform to the long lines and often they are made up of smaller units

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1. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", Memories of Lincoln. Leaves of Grass

2. There was a Child Went Forth "Autumn Rivulets Leaves of Grass p. 135

loosely connected. The time-units are seldom regular, but an effect of regularity is often secured by the frequent use of repetend.

The style of Whitman, thus summarized, still remains elusive, unshackled by rules, conforming to no set plan save the basic principles underlying primitive rhythm.

III

THE MODERN WRITERS OF FREE VERSE

A. Carl Sandburg.

There is an affiliated side of Sandburg, a power that most of his critics have overlooked, and that is his ability to make language live, to make the words on the printed page sing, dance, bleed, rage, and suffer with the aroused reader. This creative use of proper names and slang, the interlarding of cheapness and nobility which is Sandburg's highly personal idiom would have given great joy to Whitman. That old barbarian was doubtless dreaming of possible followers when he said that the Leaves of Grass with its crude vigor was a sort of enlarged sketch-piece,'a passage to something, rather than a thing in itself concluded, a language experiment'."--Louis Untermeyer.
The New Era in American Poetry. p.97.

The poet from his individual point of view selects the details which, to him, constitute life. These details, presented through his medium give his personality to his readers. The kind of details which Carl Sandburg selects, resemble those which Whitman culled from his daily experiences. Life floods impressions in to Sandburg and he returns them rearranged, touched with color and made powerful. His life is the city, and to express its vastness, he has chosen just as Whitman chose, a vehicle which will not hamper his

natural expression in any way:

"Go on talking
Only don't take my style away.
It's my face.
May be no good,
but anyway my face.
I talk with it, I sing with it, I see, taste
And feel with it,
I know why I want to keep it." 1

This is only another way of saying what Whitman says:

"From fibre heart of mine--from throat and tongue--
(My life's hot pulsing blood,
The personal urge and form for me--not merely paper, automatic type and ink,)
Each song of mine--each utterance of the past--having its long, long history--" 2

or what he cries, in his warm, vivid, "SoLong":

"Comerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man."

There is, furthermore an unmistakeable similarity in the ways in which both present this kaleidoscopic impression which life gives them:

"Only I remember him as a lover of life, a lover of children, a lover of the free, reckless laughter everywhere--lover of red hearts and red blood the world over." 4

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1. "Style" - Chicago Poems p. 51

2. "Non Precedent Songs, Farewell" - Sands of Seventy, Leaves of Grass p. 321

3. "So Long" - Songs of Parting, Leaves of Grass p. 286

4. "Dynamiter" - Chicago Poems p. 44

"of a youth who loves men and whom I love, silently,
approaching and seating himself near, that he may
hold me by the hand." 1

"The city fireman, and the fire that suddenly bursts forth
in the close pack'd square, 5
The arriving engines, the hoarse shouts, the nimble step-
ping and daring"
"Red gluts and red hungers run in the smears and juices
of my inside bones;
The child cries for a suck mother and I cry for war." 2

"They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God." 3

"Now I will you to be a bold swimmer
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to
me, shout and laughing dash with your hair." 4

If the query is a fair one (the examples having been consciously selected for their similarity), which of these are Whitman and which are Sandburg?

In their proper context, Sandburg's rhythms may be slightly more regular; certainly he has not the power for variation that the other has. He does not employ long lines with short ones so successfully as Whitman, and his units recur with greater consistency in the same poem:

"Rocking on the crest
In the low, blue lustre
Are the shadows of the ships." 6

Each of these three lines contains the same number of time-units. In his "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," Whitman writes this song for The Pennant :

"Come up here, bard, bard,
Come up here, soul, soul,
Come up here dear little child," 7

---

1. "A Glimpse" - Calamus, Leaves of Grass p. 157
2. ""Fight"--Chicago Poems p. 91
3. "Chicago" Chicago Poems p. 91
4. "Song of Myself"--Leaves of Grass p. 72
5. "Song of Myself"--Leaves of Grass p.102
6. "Sketch"--Chicago Poems, p. 5
7. "Song of the Banner at Daybreak"--Drum-Taps, Leaves of Grass p. 47

but this is unusual poetry for Whitman to write. Ordinarily when the psychological units are so short he does not space them separately but as one line:

> "Black amd impassive guns, litter of powder-parcels, strong accent" 1

or again:

> My face is ash-color'd, my sinews gnarl, away from me people retreat." 2

Often for emphasis, Whitman uses the short units at the beginnings of poems or endings, and at the beginnings of sections which make up his longer poems. In the body of his themes he delights in piling rhythm on rhythm so that long line follows long line with tireless insistency.

"Starting From Paumanok", a representative poem of about 173 lines, is composed of nineteen sections. The first of these is made up of fourteen lines, half of them with feminine endings which are quite uniform as to time-inits. The second and last lines of this section are the shortest. Now follows a section of twenty-two lines, each about half the length of those in the first portions, containing only eight feminine endings. The effect of these short masculine endings following the uniformly long passage is to startle emphasizing the change of thought, as well as resting the eye and ear.

Sandburg uses the same devices in his "Chicago"; he varies it by beginning with five uniformly short lines and following with seven long ones, five more short units, four long, one short, one long; but of his eleven short all but two have feminine endings.

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1. "Song of Myself" --Inscriptions, Leaves of Grass, p. 86
2. "Song of Myself" - Inscriptions, Leaves of Grass, p. 87

Of the twelve long lines, eight have feminine endings. This means that of the twenty-three lines, seventeen have feminine endings. In the two sections I have chosen for comparison from "Starting From Paumanok" only fifteen out of thirty-six have feminine endings. Of the one hundred thirty-seven lines remaining, eighty-seven are feminine as opposed to fifty that are not. Considering the poem as a whole one hundred two out of one hundred seventy-three lines have feminine endings. If we consider the two sections as opposed to the "Chicago" poem the percentages are: "Chicago," 74 percent, "Paumanok" (36 lines) 42 percent.

Comparing the whole poem, "Paumonok" with a corresponding number of Sandburg's lines in a group of short poems, all from the "Chicago" volume and including "Chicago" we have:

Poem	Total lines	Feminine Endings	Percentage
Fellow Citizens	16	10	.625
From The Shore	17	6	.353
Graceland	19	10	.526
'Boes	12	6	.50
The Skycraper	25	9	.35
Monus	21	10	.47
Ice-Handler	7	5	.714
Nigger	20	12	.600
Harbor	18	3	.230
Chicago	23	17	.74
	173	88	.509
Paumonok	173	102	.58

Sandburg in the same number of lines as Whitman uses only fourteen lines which is indeed a small variance. It is evident also, that both poets have used in these examples, at least, almost an equal number of masculine and of feminine endings.

In his newer volume, "Cornhuskers" Mr. Sandburg has shown himself to be developing this technique -- an irregularity which is based on actual principles of versification. Mr. Untermeyer writes, "The gain in power is evident with the first poem, a

magnificient, panoramic vision of the prairie that begins:

> "'I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover, the eyes of its women gave me a song and a slogan.
>
> Here the water went down, the icebergs slid with gravel, the gaps and the valleys hissed, and the black loam came, and the yellow sandy loam.
>
> Here between the sheds of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, here now a morning star fixes a fire sign over the timber claims and cow pastures, the corn belt, the cotton belt, the cattle ranch.'" 1

Note how the units lengthen and shorten according to the change of movement - the quick cadences in the second line:

> "How the water went down,
> The ice-bergs slid with gravel,
> The gaps and the valleys hissed
> And the black loam came,
> And the yellow, sandy loam."

The fourth line has a long rising and falling movement while the five lines of short emphatic units serves as refrain.

This is clearly a reply to Whitman's "Arouse, for you must justify me"; it is of his style and form and the thought is as he himself might have conceived it. Sandburg, as unhampered by convention as the "good, gray poet" is working out for himself the pliancy of the English language when rhythm is used without restraint for the purpose of expressing emotion. 2

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1. "The New Era of American Poetry," p. 104

2. Miss Edith Wyatt, writing in the Dial expresses her doubt that Tennyson would seek to drive Whitman and his views from what the Dial calls the "scared precincts of the muse."

> "I am sure you will be generous enough to let me place beside this message from Whitman's Song about the soul facing death, two other brief expressions on the same theme by writers of very different but who use somewhat the same metrical method,

See page 27 for foot-note 2 cont.

Foot-note for Page 36

'Facing west from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves,
Towards the home of maternity, the
Land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western
Sea - the circle almost circled.'

This is by W.E. Henley:

'So be my passing!
My task accomplished and the long day done,
My wages taken, and in my heart
Some late lark singing,
Let me be gathered to the quiet West,
The sundown splendid and screne,
Death!'

My third quotation is one of the collection of verses by Mr. Carl Sandburg recently published in Poetry .

'I shall foot it
Down the roadway in the dusk
Where shapes of hunger wander
And the fugitives of pain go by,

I shall foot it
In the silence of the morning,
See the night slur into dawn,
Hear the slow great winds arise
Where tall trees flank the way
And shoulder toward the sky.

The dust of the traveled road
Shall covet my hands and face!'

In my own view these songs may all be fittingly inclined in one categoby and mayall suitably be called poetry. I think it would have been fairer to compare Mr. Sandburg's work with that of Singer's of somewhat the same method than with the verse of Singer's af an entirely different musical tradition." --

.--"Old and New Poetry" E. Wyatt Dial 56:375 -6 May 1, '14.

B. James Oppenheim

In an old "Success Magazine" in 1910 there was a short story(I)called "The Vision of Stiny Bolinsky"; it was a simple story, without a plot. There was a Boy worked in a coal mine and a Man who told him what the picture of John Mitchell on a Labor badge meant. Some evanescent quality of style was in that story, or perhaps it was the utter sincerity of its message, or it might have been the potentialities of a poet shining through the prose:

"Stiny opened the door; the car came; the Man got on. As it was swallowed in blackness, the Man, looking back, saw in the dim corner the boy, the torch on his hat flaming smokily, waving his hand good-bye, waving frantically, his body dancing with his hand.

The man had gone; the Man had gone. But the great Dream of the Ages had penetrated the belly of the Monster for good or evil, but for ever. A Vision had come to a passionate boy, and we human beings are led alone by our Visions."

The writer of this rhythmic prose even then attempting expressing his personality in ordinary verse and failing. He was to undergo numerous stylistic struggles before he, like Whitman arrived at definite verse-form adapted to the course, imagination and eagerness of his thoughts. For this was James Oppenheim, the author of "Monday Morning and Other Poems" (2) which has appeared in 1909, and had not met with any pronounced success. A few of its poems showed an attempt at a free verse-form, but Oppenheim did not find his proper medium until he wrote the poems contained in War

1. "The Vision of Stiny Bolinsky" --Success Magazine.

2. Monday Morning and Other Poems, March, 1910.

and Laughter (1) and the "Book of Self"(2).

No one could read the latter without a thought of Whitman. Here is the same conception of the universe, of the universal self-seeking to be made manifest in the individual --the same appearance and utter lack of egotism--the use of free rhythms, sweeping melodies and abandon:

"Yea, before them, in the dust of the common road,
And bathed in the lost light of the day,
The Golden City hangs, the Golden City hangs,
There rise her white towers toward the evening star and the pale moon,
There lie her thronging streets,
There the struggling millions wrestle with confused dreams,
And are born and marvel and die ..."(3)

One great quality of Whitman's which Oppenheim unfortunately seems to lack is familarity with the common details of life; at least he does not exercise such a quality if he possesses it. The color and tone of his poems would be vastly increased were he to write a passage such as:

"The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the Third-month lambs, and the sow's pink-faint litter, and the mare's foal and the cow's calf,
And the noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of the pondside,
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there, and the beautiful curious liquid,
And the water plants with their graceful flat heads, all became part of him." (4)

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1. War and Laughter ,

2. The Book of Self-

3. "The Song of Life "--The Book of Self.

4. "There was a Child Went Forth", Leaves of Grass p.11

The result of Oppenheim's tendency to words of generalizing unmodified, very often, and sometimes without the suggestiveness of a connotative phrase, causes an elusive element to be lacking in his rhythm. He piles up verbs much as Swinburne does, capitalizing The Golden City and Birth and Death, and Earth and Life, -- making these abstractions the characters of many of his poems rather than living realities such as Whitman sketches so rapidly to make his abstractions live:

"The boy ecstatic,--with his bare feet the waves, withhis hair the atmosphere dallying,"

or

"The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand. 1

The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill," 2

or

"The big doors of the country-barn stand open and ready,
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon,
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,
The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow." 3

Sandburg, too, has a versatile use of detail!

"That pig-sticker in one corner--his mouth,
That overall factory girl --her loose cheeks". 4

" And at the window one day in summer,
Yellow of the new crock of butter
Stood against the red of new climbing roses...
And the world was all playthings." 5

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1. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", Leaves of Grass, p.11

2."Song of Myself" --Leaves of Grass p. 42

3. "Song of Myself"--Leaves of Grass p. 43
4. "Halsted Street Car", Chicago Poems, p. 11
5. "Murmurings in a Field Hospital" Chicago Poems, p. 39

Now here is Oppenheim, with his personifications:

"Said the sun: I that am immense and shaggy flame,
Sustain the small ones yonder;
But what do they do when their half of the Earth is
turned from me?
Poor dark ones, dehied my light.

A little brain, however, was on the other half of the
planet...
And so there were lamps." 1

This, instead of being a poem, is really an outline. Sandburg would make it grotesque and vivid --instead of being a "little brain", the inventor of lamps would be a peculiar individual with strange foibles and shaggy hair; Whitman would describe every person and all the verbage and each animal on that "other side of the planet". Either would have made better poems from the idea.

One can read page after page of Oppenheim without being emotionally moved, melodic, technically well-balanced and changeful as his rhythms are. It would be a subtle differende that the introduction of homelier adjectives and sounds could make; but rhytm is essentially elusive and I believe the cadences are delicately fitted to include dust and flies and bare feet and dried grass and pigstickers and yellow crocks of butter in his poetry, his verse-form would perhaps lose some of its smoothness. Whitman and Sandburg are rougher amd more uncouth. Yet with the upheaval of style comes the lava of spirit. It is characteristic of the modern movement that tradition and convention must be sacrificed for freedom. Here is a poet who has abandoned these guides

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1. "Said the Sun", War and Laughter -. 68 Century Co.

of form but retain their counsel as to context often in positive detriment to his message.

Mr. Untermeyer writes:

"In his effort to show the vast continuity of existence, to reveal life as a progression of old pageants, a revivifying of the past, he is apt to fall into the habit of cataloguing, of depending too much on glamorous names." 1

The use of the word "pageant" is significant. A pageant can never interest as much as a drama, a satire as much as a narrative. Symbols are generalization, but details, like life, are individualistic.

Whitman, as Oppenheim is, was mystical, symbolical, fond of personification, and "glamorous names"--but the former's lines seldom fail to be colorful and his rhythms pulsing because, with his trick of vast inclusion, he only generalizes by means of hundreds of details. Oppenheim, writing lines that are more compresses (and often more artistically compact) omits the hundred details and retains the cold conclusions.

Sandburg does not generalize at all except by suggestion. Oppenheim can accomplish the same thing in the same way but unfortunately he does not often enough feel this sort of thing to be worth while:

"Portrait of An Investigator of Vice".

"His nails were perfect:
They were well-trimmed, shining and regular,
But under each was a spot of dark dirt.
In those nails I saw the man." 2

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1. The New Era in American Poetry, p. 63

2. "Portrait of an Investigator of Vice", War and Laughter p. 175

C. Edgar Lee Masters.

"As a dead leaf is hurtled over the top of the trees;
As a dead leaf is dizzily driven through woodland valleys,
I am driven and tossed in the storms of living.
But as a dead leaf escapes the breezes fingers,
And sinks till it nestles motionless under a rock
So inquiet moments I dream
Of you
I dream of all that you were--
And I shall never see you again!" 1

It cannot be doubted that Edgar Lee Masters is a poet of the American tradition. It is a very special kind of tradition, however, and differs from that of which Whitman is typical. "The Spoon River Anthology" (2) expresses a vicinity -- a small Illinois town, where its author has known life but has not found it beautiful, or artistic or dignified. Masters looks straight at realities; he does not attempt to interpret them, or gloss them over:

"One died in shameful child-birth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,
One of a broken pride, in the search for hearts desire,
One after, life in far-away London and Paris
Was brought to her little space by Ella and Kate and Mag--
All, all are sleeping on the hill." 3

Just as Whitman is more specific than Oppenheim in use of detail so Masters is more specific than Whitman in use of character. The Anthology includes a vast number of descriptions of separate individuals, each with his neatly painted sins and weaknesses. To accomplish this it was necessary that every stroke tell--the broad sweep of such a brush as Whitman's would have blurred the fine lines which Masters scratches concisely with his fine pen. He does not

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1. The Great Valley, Macmillan Company p. 241

2. Macmillan Co., 1916

3. "The Hill", Spoon River Anthology p. 2

use color; his poems are unquestionably studies in black and white.

The constant use of short rhythms is noticeable, especially in comparison with Whitman. There is a uniformity of line-length almost monotonous in the Anthology; yet it is clear why he could not have employed such long units as:

> "But I, from the banks of the running Missouri, praise
> nothing in art or aught else,
> Till it has inhaled the atmosphere of this river, also
> the western paririe-scent". 1

This is the poetry of description--Masters' is the poetry of anarrative:

> ---"They mistook me
> For John Allen who was sent to the Hebrew cemetry,
> At Chicago,
> And John for me, so I lie here." 2

Masters continually sees the plot and complication of living rather than its color or magic. He often seeks to be descriptive, that he fails there and becomes uninterestingly trite:

> "There was the white face of Fear
> And the solemn face of Duty,
> And theface of self looking in the mirror,
> But there were voices calling from vernal hilltops,
> And silver spirits by moonlit gardens calling...
>
> And if there be nothing in life, and life be nothing
> So that to nail one's self to thecross is nothing lost--
> Is Death not even less?" 3

Here is a content which fails to arrest. The words are not chosen for their connotations. They are sober words, worn words, and, moreover, they are fitted together without delicacy of

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1. "Others may Praise what They Like" -Leaves of Grass p. 168

2. Spoon River Anthology.

3. "The Subway" - The Great Valley p. 207

rhythm. The meters are jogging and common and without variety. Although the same adjectives might be used to describe the Spoon River epitaphs it is likely that any reader will make the mistake of thinking Mr. Masters deliberately chose this medium to fit the common, jogging, monotonous lives of the people he was describing. I do not believe the choice was entirely conscious. It was perhaps dictated by the limitations of his muse. If Mr. Masters has at his command rhythms more syncopated and adaptable why he does not use them when his sub-ject so demands rather than continuing with the same line-lengths and dull cadences he used in the Anthology. And if, for him, free verse is not a pliable medium (As indeed it is not for many who employ it) why does he not try verse of the regular metre and rhyme?

It is obvious after an intensive study of the contemporary poets employing vers libre that its difficulty is great and that its freedom often makes it unwieldy. None of the followers have attained the ease and fluidity of the older artist. Compare the two again when both are singing of America--passages in which neither are at their best--no doubt each is trying to avoid the worn and sentimental type of patriotism.

"It is time, Republic, to get some class,
It is time to harden your muscles,
And to clear your eyes in the cold water of reality,
And to tighten your nerves.
It is time to think what nature means,
And to consult Nature." 1

And Whitman:

Oh, I see now flashing, that this America is only you and me,
Its powers, weapons, testimony, are you and me,

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1. "Come, Republic", The Great Valley, p. 72

Its roughs, beards, haughtiness, ruggedness, are you and me,"[1]

With the dissimilarity there are still many unmistakable likenesses. Both are sincerely seeking to abandon the traditions of regular verse, to express modern life in modern terms, to make themselves understood by the average man. Too often Masters verse, however is committed to the sins of his own "Petit the Poet". Free verse can "tick, tick, tick," as well as iambics while Homer and Whitman "roar in the pines" [2]

D. "Des Imagistes"

At first thought it may seem absurd to relate Amy Lowell's verse-method with Whitman's so far has vers libre come and so changed is its present form from its original cadences, In making itself a prevalent medium in America it took two distinct directions: The one, presented by Masters, Oppenheim and Sandburg we have considered in compariosn with Whitman's style. We have found similarity in their message and content--they are poets singing of democracy, of American life, both in the cities and rural districts and they are seeking to present this life realistically in a way that the modern man will appreciate. They are all poets of the present, and they have proved this especially by casting aside the old verse-form.

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1. "Chants Democratic" Leaves of Grass, Thayer and Eldridge 1860. p. 123.
2. Triolets, villanelles, rondels, rondeaus,
   Seeds in a dry pod tick, tick, tick,
   Tick, tick, tick, what little iambics,
   While Homer and Whitman roared in the pines?
   "Petit the Poet", Spoon River Anthology , p.87

Technically they are similar in their use of free rhythms; they are trying to adapt these psychological units to each change of thought and feeling; to vary the movement so that the form may correspond as delicately as possible to the content. As Mr. Eastman writes (1)

"For the attainment of these moments there are no rules, because they depend upon the things that make us different from each other .... As Walt Whitman, in his psalm of the death of Abraham Lincoln, has merged the very body of sorrow in a trinity of sensations, the fragrance of lilacs, the pendulous star, and the quivering voice of a bird---

Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim---

so has the human heart always done with that which it would have eternal."(1) And again:"Emotion is the surest arbiter of a poetic choice, and it is the priest of all supreme unions in the mind." 2

The other direction which vers libre is following is bound, perhaps, by more distinct rules. This is the domain of the Imagistes of who Miss Amy Lowell, John Gould Fletcher and H.D. (Mrs. Richard Aldington) are representative. In the preface to their volume of 1916, Some Imagist Poets ,(3) they have attempted to "explain the laws which govern" their poetry.

"Imagism refers to the manner of presentation, not to the subject. It means a clear presentation of what the author may wish to convey....The "exact" word does not mean the word which brings the effect of that object before the reader as it presented itself to the poet's mind at the time of writing the poem...The exterior world is changing and sith men's feelings and every age must express its feelings in its own individual way."

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1. "Emotional Realization", Enjoyment of Poetry p. 128
2. " " " " "
3. Some Imagist Poets, Houghton, Mifflin Co. p. VII

Again in regard to form:

"The definition of vers libre is -- a verse-form based upon cadence...Not only must the syllables so fall as to increase and continue the movement, but the whole poem must be as rounded and recurring as the circular swing of a balanced pendulum. It can be fast or slow, it may even jerk, but this perfect swing it must have even its jerks must follow the central movement...The unit in vers libre is not the foot, the number of the syllables the quantity or the line. The unit is the strophe, which may be the whole poem or may be only a part. Each strophe is a complete circle."

Here, indeed, is a new set of precepts: the strophe is the psychological unit, the recurrence of rhythms is necessary, and the absolute adherence to a clear presentation of the author's action to his subject is required.

The fact that the strophe is the psychological unit does not prevent other free verse from having the line as a psychological unit. In fact, if the Imagistes spaced as Whitman does, it would be seen very often that the stroph would exactly correspond to a single long line.

H.D. in "Sea Gods" spaces her strophe in this way:

"You will trail across the rocks
And wash them with your salt,
You will curl between sand-hills--
Y ou will thunder along the cliff--
Break--retreat--get fresh strength--
Gather and pour weight upon the beach."

Now compare Whitman, writing of the water[1] and sunset in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", using units of almost the same length, and spacing them differently:

"Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sunset drench with your splendor
me, or the men and women generations after me!
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passangers!
Stand up, tall masts of Manhatta! stand up! beautiful
hills of Brooklyn!" [2]

1. "Sea Gods", Some Imagist Poets, p.19

2. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Leaves of Grass p. 197

mSpace this passage as the Imagiste would:

1 "Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
2 Georgeous clouds of the sunset!
3 Drench with your splendor me,
4 Or the men and women generations after me!
5 Cross from shore to shore,
6 Countless crowds of apssangers!
7 Stand up tall masts of Manhatta!
8 Stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!"

Note how the first line is an exact repetition of the rhythmic unit of the first line; how the second and third are uniform with the fifth and sixth and seventh. And also note how Mrs. Aldington's verse-units are uniform with Whitman:

"You will trail across the rocks,
(Gorgeous clouds of the sunset!)
And wash them with your salt,
(Drench with your splendor me,)
You will curl between the sandhills--
(Cross from shore to shore)"

The same experiment can be made with Amy Lowell's poetry. Here is her "Second Movement", one of agroup of Grotesques written for a string quartet.

"Pale violin music whiffs across the moon,
A pale smoke of violin music blows over the moon,
Cherry petals fall and flutter,
And the white Pierrot,
Wreathed in the smoke of the violins,
Splashed with cherry petals falling, falling,
Claws a grave for himself in the fresh earth
With his finger nails," 1

Examining Whitman's poems carefully, the reader is astonished to see how often he has attempted this same effect, that of making images, pauses, endings, and movements correspond to the cadence of music. The first line of "Italian Music in Dakota"is a miracle of gentle, harmonic effect:

- "Through the soft evening air enwinding all"---2

1. Stravinsky's Three Piece, Grotesques Some Imagist Poets p. 89
2."Italian Music in Dakota",Autumn Rivulets --Leaves of Grass p 175

There is a use of vowels and consonants which is unsurpassed. The last lines are slower with rests inserted so that the melody dies away:

"Ray'd in the limpid yellow slanting sundown,
Music, Italian music in Dakota."

A different sort of music is conveyed in the grander "I Heard You Solemn-sweet Pipes of the Organ", and here Whitman seeks to give the sense of gentle breathing:

"Heart of my love! you too I heard murmuring low through
one of the wrists around my head,
Heard the pulse of you when all was still ringing little
bells last night under my ear." 1

How regular this is and fitted to the breath with absolute accuracy! Whitman is the poet of the song--he is continually making his verse-form adapt itself to lyric melody. He hears music in the storm.(2)

"Strong hum of forest tops--wind of the mountains,
Personified dim shapes--you hidden orchestras"
You serenades of phantoms with instruments alert,
Bending with Nature's rhythms all the tongues of nations;
You chords left as by vast compsers --you choruses,
You formless, free, religious dances -- you from the Orient,
You undertone of rivers, roar of pouring catarats--"
And the singing of the trees and rivers and of all nature.

Is Miss Lowell's careful piece for the stringed quartet any more delicately conceived and executed? She is more insistent upon her effects--they are much more pronounced, her words are more obvious in their suggestions; she insists that her readers shall not mistake her meanings. If she is trying to suggest flutes, she will have nothing but flutes in her reader's ears. Whitman is more indéfinite.. His rhythms are more syncopated and fitted to the strange

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1. "I heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ", Children of Adam, Leaves of Grass p. 134

2. "Proud Music of the Storm", Autumn Rivulets Leaves of Grass p. 178.

"undertones" which nature produces, rather than the man-made music.

If any passage is to be selected, however, to compare in delicacy with Miss Lowell's lovely,

"Pale violin music whiffs across the moon,"

it must be the mocking-bird's song from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1)

"Shine! shine! shine!
Pour down your warmth great sun!
While we bask, we two together.

This is the joyous refrain, composed of short units, repeated and repeated with the mocking-bird's insistence:

"Two together!
Winds blow south or winds blow north,
Day come white or day come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together."

Now the movement is rising, the bird-voice is startled; it calls:

"Blow! blow! blow!
Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore;
I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me"

The song rushes into passionate anguish, rising and rising, the units lengthening, repeating, sounding the one short flute-like note now "Soothe! Soothe! Soothe!, now "Loud! Loud! loud!" and the pitiful, low "Here I am! here!"....."O darkness! O in vain" and the dying tremolo:

"Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more."

It is impossible to describe all the effects of this obligato of sorrow and death and love. It, of all free verse lyrics, exemplifies the possibilities of Whitman--and more: the possibilities of

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1. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", Sea Drift --Leaves of Grass p. 7

free verse used sympathetically and by one whose ear was trained to the syncopated rhythm.

Miss Lowell has sought in the same poem "Grotesques" to suggest the dirge as well as the lighter melody; her ear is also trained to the irregular rhythm, and she has caught the dull, sonorous chant of the religieuse admirably:

"The priests walk endlessly
Round and round,
Droning their Latin
Off the key.
The organ crashes out in a flaring chord
And the priests hitch their chant up half a tone.
Dies illa, dies irae,
Calamitatis et miseriae
Dies magna et amara valde.
A wind rattles the leaded windows.
The little pear-shaped candle flames leap and flutter.
Dies illa, dies irae.
The swaying smoke drifts over the altar.
Calamitatis et miseriae,
The shuffling priests sprinkle holy water.
Dies magna et amara valde." 1

Because this kind of poetry is meant to be sung or accompanied by music, it is the best sort of example to illustrate the Imagiste's idea of the strophe or circle in free verse. In this padsage above, the strophe is plainly defined--the units are recurrent and monotonously regular, in order to imitate the slow wheeling and droning of the procession. The three lines of the mass are repeated separately after new motifs of the song have been introduced, and so the new time is bound up with the old by the Latin refrains.

Whitman has not the same relentless attitude toward his similes and the images of his verse. He does not see before one object and one alone, as the present writers of Imagist verse do. He cannot concentrate on a single suggestion and repeat it with accuracy of light and shade. But I have tried to show that like

1 Lowell, Amy Some Imagist Poets p. 90

them he has merged thought and form to an absolute degree; that like their school, he seeks to present his object in the form it suggests to him at the time; and that his verse-form like theirs is based upon cadence and although his units recur more irregularly, there are moments in his poetry when the "circular swing of a balanced pendulum" can be discerned. He can adapt his medium to syncopation or measured meters at will, and his effects like the effects of the imagistes are accurate.

CONCLUSION

In this swift review of poetry from the first appearance of Whitman's Leaves of Grass in 1860, the outstanding fact is the fact of a new form. I have endeavored to relate the vers libre as used by Whitman to that used by the modern writers. Of these, I believe Sandburg most like the great poet, because he is more versatile in his use of rhythms, most courageous in his vocabulary and thought. Masters is the embodiment of revolution, as Miss Lowell writes in her study of him (1) and he has even been pronounced the successor to Whitman because he has created purely American verse. Oppenheim, the idealist, is a technician with the Whitman form--his philosophy is that of "The Song of Myself"; he is the individualist, seeking to embody the mysticism of the universal.

Nor is the school of Imagism separate and distinct from Whitman's theory of verse. Some of the principles it embodies are identical, and although many of them have been gleaned directly from the French, yet it is more than probable that the indirect source was Whitman himself. A word here as to the French in order to make this connection clear: The ideas of Harriet Monroe and Pierre Lanux on this subject have already been expressed. (p. 1&2) It only remains to show how the modern movement in France, (which is frankly acknowledged to have been influenced by Whitman) is flowing into the channels of American Imagism. Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn, professor at the Ohio State University, in his Introduction to The Poets of Modern France [2] (a volume of poems including the work of

1. Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, Amy Lowell

2. The Poets of Modern France, Ludwig Lewisohn.

thirty Frenchmen, among whom are: Mallarme, Regnier, Rostand, and Verhaeren) writes:

"Several of them (the youngest group of French poets) are cultivating free verse not in the symbolist sense but in the contemporary American sense of Miss Amy Lowell and Mr. Edgar Lee Masters. What effects of permanent beauty can be thus achieved in the very fluid medium of French remains to be been...Whether using any pattern or not, all these poets have thrown off the last restraints of the older French prosody and strive after a larger, subtler, more intellectual music."

It is inspiring to those who hope for the greatest achievment in American poetry, to feel that through Whitman we have attained a share in a movement that is world-wide. We must not forget that work of the Orient in this field -- Rabindranath Tagore, and the Chinese writers whom Mr. Ezra Pound has so exquisitely interpreted. A spirit of freedom, sweeping through all nations, has cast aside the restraint of conventions and tradition. But the verse-form in which singer's are experimenting is not new, It is as old as the psalmists, far older than the rhymed , metrical poetry of yesterday. Lowell and Masters, and Sandburg are of the past as much as of the future and of the great, voices which they are echoing, Whitman's is not the least.